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THE LEVITICAL CITIES OF ISRAEL IN THE LIGHT OF THE EXCAVATION AT GEZER.

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IN the book of Joshua, chap. 21, forty-eight cities are enumerated, which it is asserted were assigned by Joshua to the Levites because that tribe received no inheritance. There is general agreement among critics that this chapter comes from the priestly stratum of the Hexateuch, the latest of all the strata embodied in it. The list is repeated with some variations and modifications in 1 Chronicles, chap. 6. Among these cities is Gezer—a town which, as we learn elsewhere (1 Kings 9:16), did not come permanently into the possession of the Israelites until the time of Solomon. Much interesting light has been thrown upon the history of the city of Gezer by the excavation which the Palestine Exploration Fund has been conducting there since 1902, under the direction of Mr. R. A. Stewart Macalister. The light which has thus been obtained illuminates some scraps of information which we have concerning other Levitical cities; and, together with the knowledge of the general course of the history of Israel which critical study has given us, indicates clearly the real nature of these Levitical cities and the origin of their “Levitical” character.

Among the many discoveries which Mr. Macalister has made at Gezer by far the most important is the temple of Ashtoreth (Astarte).¹ This temple is of Semitic construction, as is shown by the pottery of the stratum in which it was found, as well as by the bones of some skeletons found in the same stratum.² The *maššeboth* were not erected upon the native rock, but upon a stratum of earth varying in thickness from one to two feet. This earth covers the ruins of a

¹ See *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, October, 1902, and subsequent issues. It was the privilege of the writer to spend some time in Mr. Macalister's camp in March, 1903, and to examine many of the discoveries.

² *Quarterly Statement*, October, 1902, pp. 353 ff.

pre-Semitic city, the oldest walled occupation of the hill. The walls of the houses of this pre-Semitic period were covered by the stratum of earth underneath the temple, and were in close proximity



REMAINS OF THE TEMPLE OF ASHTORETH AT GEZER.

to it, proving that the temple did not exist at the period of this occupation. The proof that the temple was used as a place of worship during the period of the Hebrew kingdom is overwhelming, although this proof comes chiefly from the pottery. There can be

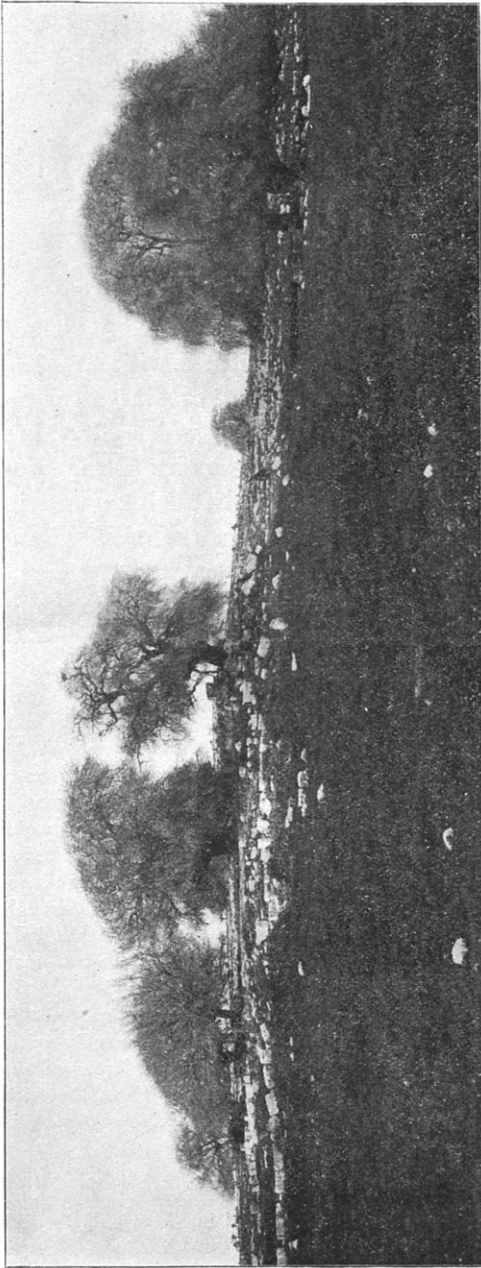
no doubt, too, that the nature of the worship in this period was the same as that of the worship of the earlier Semitic period. Emblems of the reproductive organs were found throughout this stratum.³ In it also was found the statuette of the horned Astarte.⁴

Gezer, then, down to the Babylonian exile was a center of the Baal-Ashtoreth cult. As yet there is no external evidence that other worship was carried on there. If Yahweh was worshiped there, his worship was so confused with the deities of this earlier cult as to have left no traces which we can now distinguish. He was, no doubt, worshiped, and gradually appropriated the whole temple and cult, or the city would never have been counted Levitical.⁵ The practice of this cult necessitated the presence here of a large number of priests. That they became wealthy, the gold which Mr. Macalister found in the temple attests. The Deuteronomic reform placed a ban upon this worship (Deut., chap. 12). Ezekiel deposed its priests from their office (Ezek. 44:8 ff.). Large and rich priestly families were still connected with Gezer, however, and it became necessary to account for this when the priestly narratives were taking shape in the priestly circles. The explanation that was offered was that this city had been assigned as an inheritance to the Levites in

³ Mr. Macalister will not publish full information concerning these until the concluding memoir of the expedition is issued. It may be stated, however, that in the lower Semitic strata female emblems were more abundant (the second of these strata containing a large number made of terra cotta), while in the upper strata phallic emblems superseded these. This affords archæological confirmation that the general development of Semitic religion, which the writer set forth in his *Sketch of Semitic Origins*, 1902, is for the city of Gezer correct. Several critics of that view have overlooked the fact that the writer admitted that there were originally many Ishtars and Tammuzes, and that masculine deities may in many instances have been developed from a Tammuz instead of an Ishtar (*cf.* pp. 133, 190 ff., and 289 ff.). But for the monotony of repetition, this would have been stated in connection with all deities where epigraphic evidence does not attest transformation from a goddess. The chief thesis of that work, which is strengthened by the discoveries at Gezer, is that the Ishtar-Tammuz cult is the primitive Semitic cult; that the chief Semitic deities were developed out of it; that, broadly speaking, in earlier times the feminine element was the more prominent, in later times the masculine; and that in tracing its development one follows the trail of Semitic evolution.

⁴ See *Quarterly Statement*, July, 1903, pp. 225 ff.

⁵ This is consonant with the origin of Yahweh as traced in the writer's *Semitic Origins*, chap. vii.



SACRED TREES AT 'AIN YAGUZ.

the olden time. That this is in broad outline the history of the city of Gezer cannot, in view of the evidence, be denied. If the history of Gezer was such, the question naturally arises: Did not the history of the other Levitical cities run a similar course? Unfortunately, our information is too slight to afford a complete answer to this inquiry, but the little that we do know about some of these cities indicates that an affirmative answer to this question would probably not be far wrong.

The first of the Levitical cities to be mentioned in Joshua, chap. 21, is Hebron. How it can have been a Levitical city in the period which immediately followed the conquest is very puzzling, since the Calebites of the tribe of Judah acquired it (Judg. 1:20). Indeed, there is good reason to believe that Hebron

contained a sanctuary in the early period and, like Gezer, was for this reason enumerated among the Levitical cities at a much later time.

In the period of the Hebrew kingdom an altar existed at Hebron, the construction of which was attributed to Abraham (Gen. 13:18). This altar stood by some sacred oaks, which were known as the oaks of Mamre. During the reign of David there was not only a sanctuary at Hebron, but it was the sacred city of the tribe of Judah, for David was anointed king "before Yahweh" at Hebron (2 Sam. 5:3), and Absalom went thither to pay a vow to Yahweh (2 Sam. 15:7 ff.). According to the priestly stratum of the Pentateuch (Gen., chap. 23), the patriarchal burying place was the cave of Machpelah at Hebron. According to other strata of the Pentateuch, there were patriarchal sepulchers beyond Jordan and at Shechem (*cf.* Gen. 50:10 ff., and Josh. 24:32 ff.). Now, in the light of the fact that at Gezer a sacred cave was found in connection with the temple,⁶ it is quite possible that the cave of Machpelah obtained its sacred character long before that sanctity was explained by regarding it as a patriarchal place of burial. The view that the history of Hebron is parallel to the history of Gezer, and that it acquired its "Levitical" character late, receives confirmation from the fact that in the genealogies of the Chronicler Hebron personified is counted both as a descendant of Judah and of Levi (*cf.* 1 Chron. 2:42, 43, and 6:2 [Heb. 5:28]).

Another of the cities which Joshua, chap. 21, counts as Levitical is Beth-Shemesh, the name of which, as is generally recognized, betokens an early worship of the sun-god.⁷ Perhaps as *Ša-ma-ša-na* this city is mentioned in the list of Rameses II.'s Palestinian conquests.⁸ Beth-Shemesh, then, was probably a sacred city before the Hebrew conquest. It was no doubt gradually appropriated by the cult of Yahweh, and after the exile was counted Levitical.

Gibeon is another of these Levitical cities, the history of which in all probability ran a similar course. At the beginning of the reign of Solomon "the great high-place" in the vicinity of Jerusalem

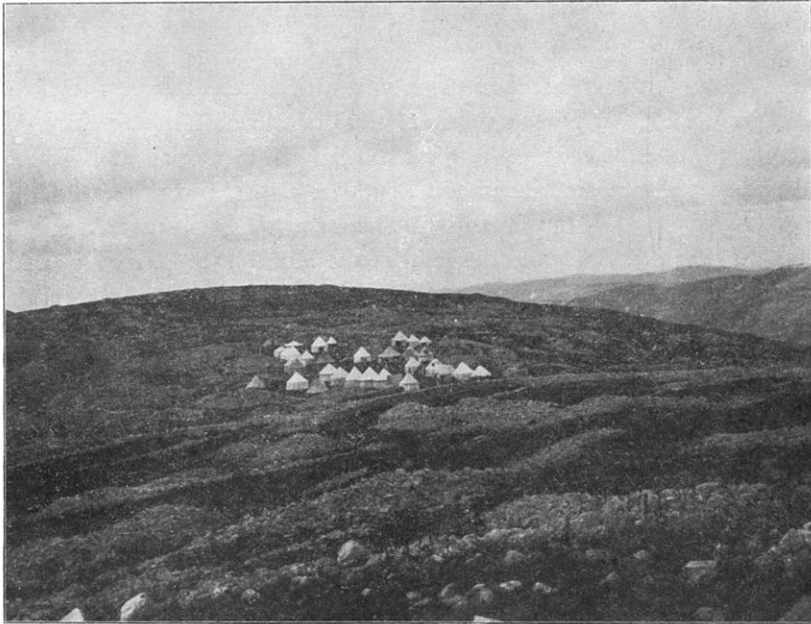
⁶ *Cf.* *Quarterly Statement*, January, 1903, p. 24.

⁷ *Cf.* MOORE, *Commentary on Judges*, p. 325, and the article "Beth-Shemesh" in HASTINGS'S *Dictionary of the Bible* and in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*.

⁸ See W. MAX MÜLLER, *Asien und Europa*, p. 166.

was at Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4). We learn from Joshua 9:23 that the pre-Israelitish inhabitants of Gibeon became temple slaves, presumably in this sanctuary. It seems probable that the sanctuary was of Canaanitish origin, for in the time of David the oracle of Yahweh was in the hands of the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21:1-6).

Shechem, too, is one of the Levitical cities, which, according to



A SAMARITAN ENCAMPMENT ON MOUNT GERIZIM.

the scraps of its known history, seems to have passed through a similar religious development. That the sanctuary at Shechem antedated the Hebrew occupation is indicated by the tradition which ascribed the building of the altar near its sacred tree to Abraham (Gen. 12:6, 7). A temple existed here in the time of the Judges (Judg. 9:27). To this temple came Rehoboam at a later time for his coronation (1 Kings 12:1). This temple, which was probably on Mount Gerizim, was no doubt among those where the worship of Yahweh was revived after the exile of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 17:27-33). Here still later the temple of the Samaritans was built,

which existed in the time of Christ (John 4:20), and here the descendants of the Samaritans encamp for two weeks every year to celebrate the Passover on the sacred mountain. Shechem was a Levitical city only in the idealistic sense of the priestly narrative.

Taanach, which is included among the Levitical cities of Joshua, chap. 21, also had a similar history. Professor Sellin has discovered an old high-place there and an altar which is probably of Canaanitish structure.⁹ In like manner Kadesh, the very name of which identifies it as an old sanctuary, existed in pre-Israelitish times, as is shown by the Tel el-Amarna tablets.¹⁰ The priestly writer not only counts this a Levitical city, but accords it the honor along with Hebron and Shechem of being a city of refuge.

Turning our attention to the east of the Jordan, we find in the priestly list Be-eshterah as a Levitical city. The parallel passage in Chronicles substitutes Ashtaroeth for this. Holzinger points out that Be-eshterah is a corruption of Beth-Ashtarah.¹¹ There can be no doubt that the city intended is the famous city called Ashtart in the Tel el-Amarna tablets, and Ashtaroeth and Ashtoreth Karnaim in the Old Testament. There is evidence that the primitive Semitic goddess was worshiped there down to comparatively late times.¹² The history of this Levitical city must be quite parallel to the history of Gezer. That such a city, bearing even into the period when it was counted Levitical the name of the heathen goddess, could be included in the inheritance of the Levites is a strong argument for the general development of the religion of Yahweh already referred to.

Two more of the Levitical cities east of the Jordan may be profitably discussed, though the uncertainty of their sites precludes an entirely satisfactory conclusion. The first of these is Ramoth-Gilead—also a city of refuge. It must be confessed that the location of this city has never been positively settled. Merrill¹³ believes that it occupied the site of Geresa (Jerash); Buhl¹⁴ places it at Gebel

⁹ Cf. *Verhandlungen des XIII. internationalen Orientalisten-Kongress*, pp. 196 ff.

¹⁰ See *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek*, Vol. V, Nos. 50, 22; 151, 60, etc.

¹¹ "Das Buch Josua" in MARTI'S *Kurzer Hand-Commentar*, p. 87.

¹² See BARTON, *Semitic Origins*, pp. 237 ff.

¹³ *East of the Jordan*, pp. 284-90, and the articles "Cities of Refuge" and "Ramoth Gilead" in HASTINGS'S *Dictionary of the Bible*.

¹⁴ *Geographie des alten Palästina*, pp. 261 ff.

Ja'lud, one of the spurs of Jebel Osha near Es-Salt; George Adam Smith¹⁵ thinks it near the Yarmuk; and Benzinger¹⁶ would place it still farther north. Of these various locations the heights of Jebel Osha are, in my opinion, the correct site. Eusebius states that Ramoth-Gilead was fifteen Roman miles west of Philadelphia (Amman)—a condition which Jebel Osha fulfils.¹⁷ It was one of



SACRED TREE AT JEBEL OSHA.

three east-Jordanic cities of refuge (Deut. 4:43). One of these was Bezer near the Arnon, and another Golan in Bashan (the Hauran), and this intermediate location would be very fitting. Merrill points out that the Babylonian Talmud places the cities of refuge in pairs, so that those on the east of the river are opposite those on the west.

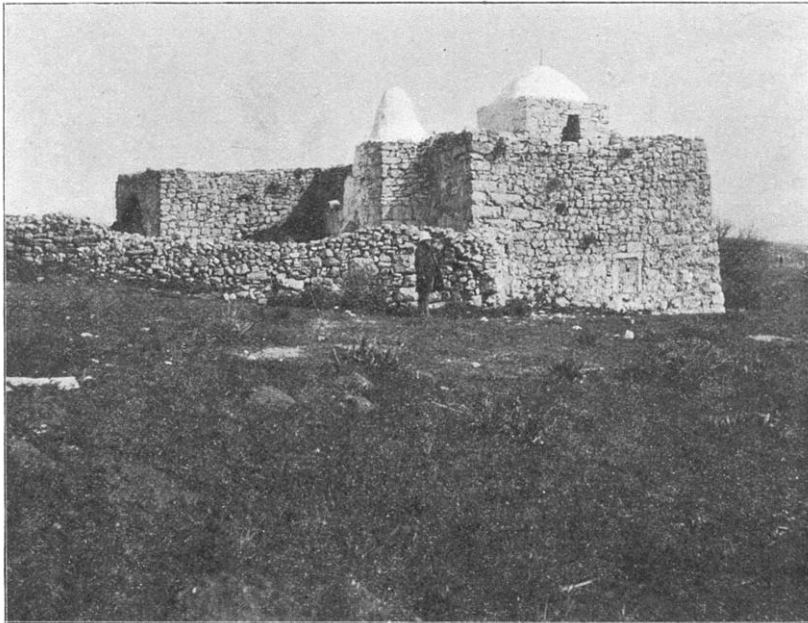
¹⁵ *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, pp. 586-88.

¹⁶ "Könige" in MARTI'S *Kurzer Hand-Commentar*, p. 21.

¹⁷ The reading *contra orientem* in Jerome is manifestly a scribal error.

This should not be taken too literally.¹⁸ It favors Jebel Osha as well as Jerash.

One reason which leads some scholars to look for Ramoth-Gilead in the far north is that in 1 Kings 4:13 Solomon's tax-collector who resided in Ramoth-Gilead is said to have had charge of Argob and Bashan. The text of the passage has undoubtedly been glossed, and

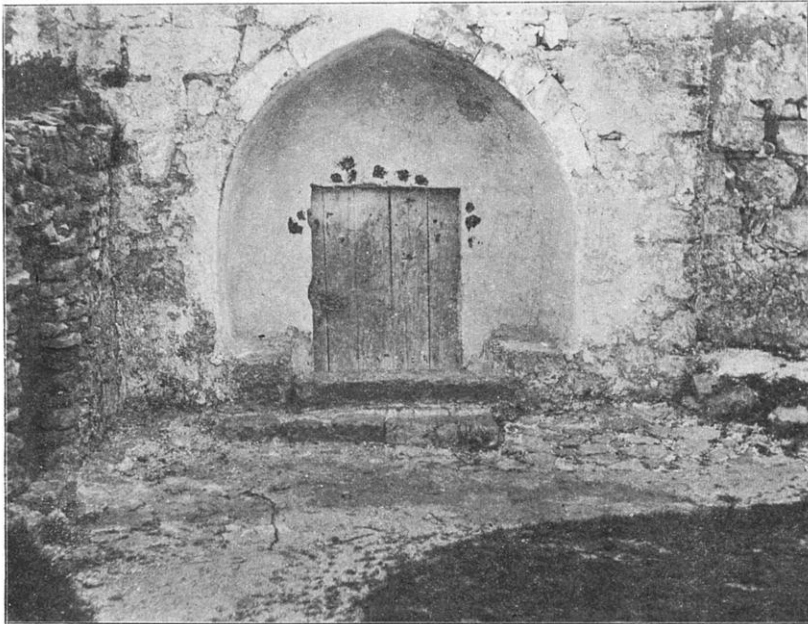


SO-CALLED TOMB OF HOSEA AT JEBEL OSHA.

these words are probably from a later hand; 5:19 places a collector in the neighborhood of Heshbon; 5:14 has another at Mahanaim; and the third, who appears to have been the son of the first, may well have been in the neighborhood of Jebel Osha. If the words which assign to him the towns of Jair be genuine, they favor this, for Numb. 32:39, 41

¹⁸ Broadly speaking, Jebel Osha is opposite Shechem. In descending from Shechem toward the Jordan the valleys lead the traveler south to a point opposite the Jabbok. On the east side one naturally ascends from the banks of the Jabbok to the high table-lands which lie between it and Jebel Osha. The correspondence is sufficiently close to suggest the talmudic correlation.

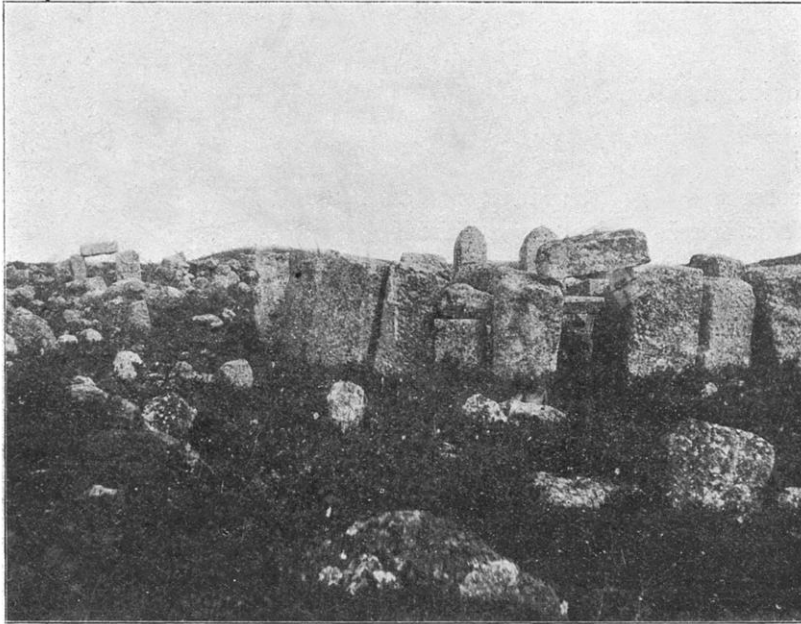
place these towns in Gilead. Another reason urged in favor of placing Ramoth-Gilead farther north is that its possession was contested by the Arameans (1 Kings, chap. 22; 2 Chron., chap. 18). This is really no argument, however, for we do not know how far south the conquests of the king of Damascus may have extended. It is also urged that chariots (see 1 Kings, chap. 22) could operate at Jerash,



HENNA STAINS AT THE TOMB OF HOSEA.

while they could not in the region south of the Jabbok. This, too, appears to me an inconclusive argument. It would not be extremely difficult to lead a road up the hills from the Jabbok to the plains north of Jebel Osha by winding backward and forward up the slope, and when once at the top there is much more scope for the use of chariots than in any region which I saw in the vicinity of Jerash. When, now, we consider that the name Ramoth-Gilead means "the heights of Gilead," and that Jebel Osha is the highest point in Palestine south of Hermon, and recall that the name Gilead has survived in connection with one of these peaks, it seems most probable that this is the site of the old Levitical city which bore that name.

The writer visited Jebel Osha on March 26, 1903, and observed there some phenomena which convinced him that, whether he be right in thinking it the site of Ramoth-Gilead or not, an old sanctuary in which the mother-goddess was worshiped once existed here. It is well known that a Mohammedan *welî*, said to be the tomb of the prophet Hosea,¹⁹ exists here. Near it is a sacred tree, an oak. On



CROMLECHS AND DOLMENS AT 'AIN YAGUZ.

the lintel of the door of the so-called tomb of Hosea we found henna stains, as is shown in the accompanying photograph. Inquiry as to why these stains were placed here elicited the information that the women had a festival here which had recently been celebrated, and that as one of their rites they had stained this lintel. It is a somewhat striking fact that this is a women's festival. It reminds one that "the daughters of Israel went yearly to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year" (Judg. 11:40). The

¹⁹ For the antiquity of the tradition connecting this with Hosea cf. BAEDER, *Palestine and Syria*, 1898, p. 163.

researches of Professor Curtis²⁰ make it easy for us to believe that this modern women's festival is a survival of that mentioned in Judges.²¹

A little to the north of this *welî* at the summit of this peak there is an old cave, which was perhaps once used in connection with a sanctuary. A flight of steps cut in the native rock led down into it. The rock has so broken now that the western side of the cave is open to the weather, and the stairs no longer reach the bottom, but it was evidently once occupied.

The other town of which a word may be said is Jazer. The site of it is uncertain. Merrill²² and the editors of Baedeker's *Palestine*²³ identify this town with Khirbet Sâr,²⁴ while Oliphant and Cheyne²⁵ identify it with Yaguz. The data for the determination of the locality seem to me indeterminate, although the *Onomasticon* favors Sâr. Whatever its ancient name, there is evidence that a sacred place, such as a Levitical city possessed, once existed at Yaguz. On March 22, 1903, the writer inspected the country around 'Ain Yaguz. There are ruins of ancient buildings there, probably from the Byzantine period.²⁶ But most interesting are the sacred trees and the cromlechs and dolmens, some of which are shown in the photographs. The sacredness of these trees, like that on Jebel Osha, is shown by the

²⁰ *Primitive Semitic Religion Today*, 1903.

²¹ Bethlehem is not included among the Levitical cities, but it is certain that a sanctuary of Yahweh existed there (see 1 Sam. 16:1-6). The passage which describes it is thought to be a late addition to the text of Samuel, but that only shows that the sanctuary persisted for a long time. Connected with this sanctuary there was probably a cave which was sacred to the Semitic mother-goddess before it was sacred to Yahweh. This cave still exists at Bethlehem. It is now called the Milk Grotto (*cf.* BAEDEKER, *Palestine*, p. 126). Its sanctity is now accounted for by the legend that once when the holy family took refuge there a drop of the Virgin's milk fell on the floor. Christians and Mohammedans alike believe that it not only has the power to increase the milk of women and of animals, but to cure barrenness. Cakes made of its dust and stamped with the image of the Virgin are still sold to travelers. This is no doubt a survival of primitive worship similar to that on Jebel Osha.

²² *East of the Jordan*, pp. 405, 485, and article "Jazer" in HASTINGS's *Dictionary of the Bible*.

²³ See p. 173.

²⁴ For the ruins *cf.* CONDER, *Survey of Eastern Palestine*, p. 153.

²⁵ Article "Jazer" in *Encyclopædia Biblica*.

²⁶ For description of all the remains *cf.* CONDER, *Survey of Eastern Palestine*, p. 279.

fact that their branches have not been cut for firewood. The oaks which grow in all the country around are tortured into grotesque shapes by this mutilation, while these are allowed to grow symmetrically. The sacred stones are now used to mark the graves of nomadic Arabs, and the stones are marked with *wasms* of their tribes. These facts are in the present state of our knowledge indeterminate, but they would show, if we could be sure on other grounds that Jazer was at Yaguz, that its history probably ran parallel to that of other Levitical cities. Had we the data for writing the history of all the Levitical cities, it would probably be found to run in every case the same general course as that of Gezer, Hebron, Shechem, and Ash-taroath. The origin of the Levitical cities²⁷ and of the Yahweh cult in which the writer believes is not, as he has pointed out elsewhere,²⁸ a naturalistic one. A recognition of the elements which the religion of Israel possessed in common with their Semitic cousins, so far from eliminating the supernatural from their religion, makes it all the more prominent. The unique spirituality of the prophetic conception of God and the high plane of morality on which the prophetic teaching moves are not accounted for by their environment or by the origin of the husk in which they were bound up. A study of that environment and a recognition of how intimately it was associated with the fiber of the history of Israel, make the really supernatural element all the more prominent.

²⁷ Since the writing of this article was begun I have noticed that the origin of the Levitical cities here set forth has been stated in substance in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, col. 2774. The view was reached by me quite independently, however.

²⁸ *Semitic Origins*, pp. 306 ff.